

## On Sheep and Plants

### The 'Felt' Oeuvre of Claudy Jongstra

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[ DAVID STROBAND ]

One day in 1994, Claudy Jongstra (°1963) visited the Textile Museum in Tilburg. There she saw a Mongolian yurt (nomad's tent) made of felt inlaid with all manner of patterns. Since that moment, now some twenty years ago, felt has been her material.

Jongstra trained as a fashion designer at the HKU, or University of the Arts Utrecht. Initially she designed ready-to-wear clothing, but the encounter with the felt nomad's tent set her career on a new course. It was the warm look and feel of felt, and its intense tactility, that attracted her most.

Since the mid-1990s, Claudy Jongstra has been on a quest to discover processes for using felt in imaginative ways. It could even be said that she has technically advanced and refined the centuries-old technique of felt-making. She has also stripped this unique material of its somewhat stuffy, frumpy image. The raw material for felting is wool, from sheep, goats, camels and even yaks. Felt is made by washing the wool fibres in warm soapy water, then 'agitating' them. Jongstra has developed more than a hundred felt recipes for a wide range of uses. All the recipes have been documented, and the possible uses recorded in photographs. But the processes must remain a secret. We are not allowed a behind-the-scenes glimpse at Claudy Jongstra's studio. And that is perfectly understandable, since her name has become a brand in itself. Initially she designed under the witty name *Not Tom, Dick & Harry*. She now operates under the name Studio Claudy Jongstra. The beating heart of the studio is located in rural Friesland where, in the village of Spannum, Jongstra finds the peace and concentration to research and think about new uses and designs. She has a permanent supply of the raw material, the wool, close at hand: she keeps a flock of some 200 sheep. The flock consists of a variety of European breeds, such as the Scottish Gotland ('a comical sheep with big Rasta curls', according to those in the know), the Schoonebeek and the Drenthe Heath sheep, a rare breed known for its long hair that numbers only 1,200 worldwide. The flock is also used to keep down the weeds on the dikes. Jongstra's sustainable approach means that the wool is dyed in vats on her own premises.



## Capes for the Jedi

Claudy Jongstra engages in a wide range of activities. She has upholstered pieces of furniture by designers including Hella Jongerius (the Kasese Chair), Maarten Baas, the Italian designer Ettore Sottsass and Giulio Cappellini, another Italian designer. She has also created concepts expressed in felt for garments by fashion designers including Christian Lacroix, Donna Karan and John Galliano. In around 1997, indirectly and by coincidence, she came into contact with the costume designer for *The Phantom Menace*, the first of a three-part prequel to the original *Star Wars* trilogy, directed by George Lucas. She was asked to produce fifty metres of felt in just two weeks. The material was for the capes of the Jedi warriors. Jongstra had to call in the help of her brother, sister and father to meet the tight deadline.

This commission certainly helped to establish her international reputation. So that she no longer needs to call in the back-up troops, Jongstra has worked

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Barnes Foundation,  
Philadelphia, 2012



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Work for the Ketelfactory,  
Schiedam, 2013

with engineers to develop a 'felt robot'. The production process now requires slightly less manual labour but, in the final creative phase, human input is essential. Jongstra works on her labour-intensive production processes with a team of assistants, including locals. In the surrounding area there are still people to be found who can spin and card wool, two traditional skills. Jongstra is frequently visited by international fashion and art students who are keen to learn precisely these craft skills.

### **Robust, but elegant**

Since 2003, Jongstra has worked closely with architects including Rem Koolhaas, Jo Coenen, the architects' firms MVRDV and Claus & Kaan, and the U.S.-based firm Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects. In her work with the architects, she aims to create a specific ambience for each of the spaces. Jongstra strives for what she describes as 'creative equality'. She no longer works with fashion designers. In her view, they simply put a few stitches in her felt, then claim all the credit. An exception to this is Alexander van Slobbe, with whom she has created haute couture pieces in which felt plays a leading role.

The paradox in the look and feel of Jongstra's materials manifests itself in her interior designs. The felt can appear rough as well as smooth. The addition of metallic organza or delicate silk fibres makes it appear transparent. Many of the designs – large wall hangings or coverings – are to be found in modern buildings with designs characterised by clean lines. She has brought spaces to life, as it were, in Amsterdam's new public library, the Bank of Luxemburg and

the Netherlands Embassy in Berlin. Some of her designs have been described as rough, warm, cool and vivid in the same breath. Or dense and insulating, but at the same time translucent. 'Robust, but elegant' is a much-used description. Colours play an important role in her interior designs. In the past, Jongstra had the dyes produced elsewhere, but she now produces them in her own dye-works, using plant extracts such as madder and woad. Her palette has changed over the years, from vivid colours such as indigo to more earthy colours such as yellow, brown and red.

A tapestry of twenty-one by six metres hangs in the entrance hall of the new Fries Museum in Leeuwarden. Colour plays an essential role in the tapestry, and it took Jongstra and her team four years to complete it. The work is a visualisation of the Frisian landscape, in which sky, water and earth are the main elements. The tapestry is made from wool and silk, dyed naturally with cochineal (purple), indigo (blue) and woad (yellow). The Frisian horizon is visualised using guipure, a richly embellished 18th-century lace technique.

Jongstra seeks to transmit the significance of nature as well as cultural heritage. She likes to make us aware of the rich cultural traditions we carry with us. She refers to the famous 17th-century painting *Girl with the Red Hat* (1655) by Johannes Vermeer, in which the colour red has a remarkable warm glow. This colour can only be made using natural extracts, such as madder, and cannot be synthetically produced.

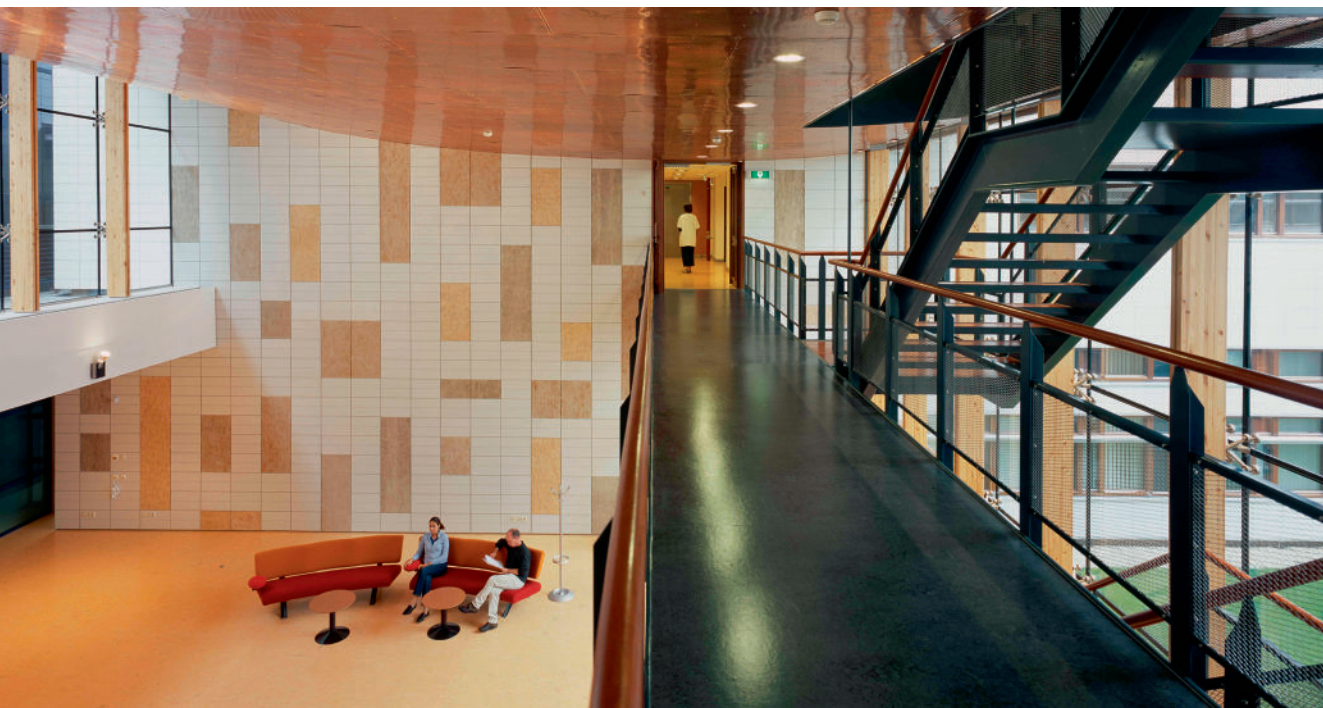
For some time now, Jongstra has owned a piece of land in the Wadden area where, in cooperation with scientists from Wageningen University, she grows her plants. St. John's Wort, red clover and larkspur, among others, can be found there and form the basis for a whole range of dyes.

## International and local

Jongstra is now entirely self-supporting. Her work can be found all over the world, but the production process takes place strictly in her own region. Since globalisation has taken hold, the local has become more important in Western society. And certainly, since the onset of the latest economic crisis, there has been a renewed emphasis on self-sufficiency. In principle, we have access to the whole world through all manner of media, but there is a growing awareness that we should look to our immediate environment to support ourselves.

Jongstra's approach is characterised by the drive for sustainability, and a strongly evident awareness when it comes to heritage (from the perspective of culture as well as nature). Her oeuvre has been exhibited in locations including the United Nations building in New York and at the World Economic Forum in Davos, places where political and economic vistas are defined. These venues gave Jongstra's work an added dimension of social and political engagement.

In a vast hall of the new Barnes Foundation building in Philadelphia, she created fifteen felt-wrapped panels, each with a different structure. The softness of the felt integrates beautifully with the architecture of the U.S.-based firm Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects. The building – limestone, steel and glass – houses a valuable collection of modern art, including works by Paul Cezanne, Vincent van Gogh and Pablo Picasso. The felt panels clearly have an acoustic function too. Wool absorbs sound and also conducts it.



Two large walls of a room at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York are clad with two large hangings in a palette of natural colours, gold and grey.

Jongstra's designs are known for their lifelike character. They radiate intimacy, warmth and lightness. Jongstra herself says people often tell her that they experience her material as life-enhancing. She designed wall reliefs for waiting rooms in the Radiotherapy department at the University Medical Center Utrecht. Many of the patients who use these rooms are seriously ill. The rooms were originally designed with fairly cold materials such as glass, steel, copper and ceramic tiles. Jongstra suggested alternating the ceramic tiles with rectangular panels of felt (Merino wool, metallic organza and raw silk). Vertical and horizontal panels, varying in height from fifty centimetres to six metres, were placed in modules forty-five centimetres deep. Some of the panels display a wide range of grey tints, others a varied palette of warm yellows and reds. Within the room as a whole, the felts show all the colour gradations of the sky and earth.

Claudy Jongstra has proved that she is able to blend her designs with architecture so that they interact meaningfully. They inspire, in a stimulating, community-oriented way. In essence, they embody statements about today's screen-obsessed society. Their intense tactility, their intimacy and their traditional production method have the potential to form a welcome alternative to our fast-paced, functionality-oriented network society and, in fact, offer a vision of a reality beyond that society. ■

*Translated by Yvette Mead*

Above left

© Studio Claudy Jongstra.

The Lincoln Center for the  
Performing Arts, New York, 2010.

Below left

© Studio Claudy Jongstra.

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Right

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Entrance Hall Fries Museum,  
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